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SUBJECT: MARCH 22 NIGERIA AVIAN FLU UPDATE

REF: ABUJA 576

¶1. (SBU) Summary. As of March 15, reliable information, including from testing, was not available on the extent of AI in Nigeria. State veterinarians lacked vehicles and equipment, and some lacked personal protective equipment. There was no documentation on the location and numbers of small flocks within Nigeria's urban areas. A high-level official at the Vom laboratory said his superiors told him to "hold off" on releasing information on confirmed cases of AI in some southern states. In some cases, AI's spread is facilitated by members of AI surveillance teams, as well as by contaminated feed sacks. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The following assessment of the avian influenza (AI) in Nigeria is current as of March 15 and is based on USAID officials' discussions with Nigerians who attended four days of AI training funded by USAID/Nigeria. The 600-plus participants included state veterinarians and their staff from all Nigerian states; private veterinarians, leaders of the Nigerian poultry industry, feed-mill operators, and persons from poultry-related industries. The first two days of training were held in Ibadan and the second two in Minna, Niger State. A USAID official attended the Ibadan training and provided his impressions to the USAID official who attended the Minna training.

Reliable information from the states is not available  
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¶3. (SBU) Based on firsthand information from state veterinarians, it is not possible to evaluate accurately the state of Nigeria's poultry industry. The clinical signs of the extant Newcastle disease that normally infects and causes high mortality in Nigeria's poultry flocks during the harmattan (dusty) season are similar to lesions caused by highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI). Because of this, the presence of HPAI cannot be confirmed without laboratory testing -- which Nigeria is not carrying out consistently. Extremely high flock mortality (greater than 50% in three days), however, is a strong indicator used to determine positive-flock HPAI status in the absence of laboratory tests. There are no other poultry diseases with these specific clinical signs that kill 50% or more of a flock in

less than a week.

¶4. (SBU) Owners of small flocks, which make up as much as 80% of Nigeria's poultry, do not report disease outbreaks for reasons such as mistrust of state officials, and the fear of losing one's business and one's personal reputation. When small farmers' birds start to show clinical signs of AI, their standard reaction is to immediately sell all the birds for meat, rather than report the outbreak or suffer losses.

¶5. (SBU) State veterinary officials lack vehicles, personal protective equipment (PPEs), sampling equipment, and other materials necessary to collect the information or samples required for proper reporting. Samples must be delivered to the Vom National Veterinary Research Institute within three days to be of consistent value. Because in many cases it is not possible to do so, state veterinarians very often do not make the attempt.

¶6. (SBU) There is no documentation on the location and numbers of small flocks within Nigeria's urban areas. State veterinarians said even if they had the vehicles to permit mobility, it would be impossible to fully survey the virus's progress in denser urban areas such as Kano, the largest poultry producer in the north. Kano's bird flocks are spread both widely and densely throughout the residential areas of this city of at least 4 million people. Bauchi State officials reported being threatened by poultry owners in some parts of the state and could not fully document AI's spread there. The GON classified Jigawa State as free of HPAI -- even though all of its neighbors, including Niger,

ABUJA 00000647 002 OF 003

are confirmed for HPAI. When a Jigawa official was asked at the training why his state had not reported any AI outbreaks on farms and had not sent in samples for testing, he said all of the state's flocks already were dead.

GON officials suppress positive test results  
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¶7. (SBU) According to reports from private veterinarians that cannot yet be confirmed, some farms in Nigeria's south experienced the high flock mortality typical of HPAI as early as Jan. 15, but there were no official reports of this. Southern poultry farmers, however, were proactive and responded by initiating a private vaccination program -- with efficacy as high as 95% -- not sanctioned by the Government of Nigeria (GON). Commercial poultry farmers in the north did not vaccinate their birds or conceal the early outbreaks in their flocks.

¶8. (SBU) A high-level official from the Vom laboratory, however, said he heard similar reports concerning vaccinations in the south and was proceeding to Lagos to conduct farm visits and a more complete follow-up to verify these reports. The Vom laboratory can determine through testing whether a particular flock has been vaccinated. The Vom official said his motivation in following up was to obtain information that would encourage the GON to authorize a national bird-vaccination program. The same Vom official said his superiors told him to "hold off" on releasing until the "appropriate time" information concerning incidences of AI, as confirmed by laboratory tests, in certain southern states. (Note: AI has now been confirmed in several southern states. The U.S. Mission has not received other reports of GON officials being instructed to suppress laboratory results confirming AI. End note.)

Illegal poultry imports seem certain  
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¶9. (SBU) Statistical analysis indicates and common sense suggests that Nigeria imports large quantities of commercial replacement birds despite the GON's ban on poultry imports.

Nigeria's poultry breeder/multiplier industry is not capable of producing the required commercial stock. Attendees said unofficial hatcheries in Kano import fertile eggs from Egypt (which is now positive for AI) and possibly other places to meet Nigeria's need for commercial flocks' replacement birds. When the USAID officer visited Kano recently, he sought information regarding the breeder and hatchery industry and egg production to support hatcheries. But neither state veterinary staffers nor the Poultry Association of Nigeria could provide information about these.

#### State veterinarians' complaints

¶10. (SBU) As of March 15, state veterinarians attending the training in Minna still did not have PPEs or other equipment or support. They were angered by press reports that Nigeria recently gave some donated PPEs to the Government of Niger. GON officials at the training announced that state veterinarians could go to Abuja and pick up their PPEs and equipment on their way home. According to these veterinarians, the GON last year sold 1,000 government cars and left state veterinarians without transportation. State veterinarians have received reduced pay since October 2005 and say they have little incentive to respond to the AI outbreak.

#### Comment

¶11. (SBU) Veterinary staff and surveillance teams do not fully understand the mechanisms by which bird diseases are spread, and Nigerian surveillance officers themselves likely are major vectors in spreading AI. The majority of

ABUJA 00000647 003 OF 003

Nigeria's reported AI outbreaks have occurred in urban areas. In these cases, the virus's spread probably is not facilitated by migratory birds but rather by surveillance teams.

¶12. (SBU) Nigeria's feed industry uses and reuses feed sacks and does not have a sanitary means to deliver disease-free feed to poultry farms. If this feed distribution system is not corrected immediately, AI will continue to spread rapidly to most of Nigeria's commercial flocks. In this case, only backyard noncommercial, free-range birds would be spared this particular method of AI's spread. Backyard flocks likely will avoid much of the AI afflicting Nigeria because they are not associated with what appear to be the most common vectors: surveillance teams and recycled feed sacks and egg trays. If AI is being spread in Nigeria by wild birds, backyard flocks are the most susceptible domestic poultry and will succumb rapidly to AI -- despite GON officials' assertions that Nigerian free-range chickens are more resistant.

¶13. (SBU) Nigeria's southern and southwestern commercial poultry industry already responded to the AI outbreak independent of the GON through a private-practice vaccination program. As a result, the country's southern and southwestern poultry industry likely will save itself and recover. Northern Nigeria needs international organizations and the USG to closely monitor its backyard poultry industry, because a GON monitoring system does not exist.

CAMPBELL